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ABSTRACT

A transactional evaluation of how foreign students at New Mexico State University feel about the quality of their education, and their relationship with the faculty and peers, was undertaken. The survey questions focused on faculty and staff, peer relations, textbook quality, and coursework relevancy toward academic achievement. Foreign students' views include the following: after an overt, initial effort by the foreign student, most American students are receptive and friendly; American students are uneducated about other countries; the quality of textbooks is good; and courses are useful. Study recommendations include the following: planned social activities are needed to introduce faculty and staff to foreign students; and elementary and secondary school social studies programs should be evaluated to determine whether they adequately cover other countries. A questionnaire and responses to each item are appended. (SW)

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NMSU FOREIGN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS:
A TRANSACTIONAL EVALUATION

EDUCATION 540
Evaluating Classroom Curriculum
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BY: Osman Alawiye
George L. Westbrook

June 28, 1982

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NMSU FOREIGN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS: A TRANSACTIONAL EVALUATION

Our objective in performing this transactional evaluation was to obtain some insight into how foreign students enrolled at New Mexico State University feel about the quality of their education, and their relationships with the faculty and their peers. The study focused on four basic areas of faculty and staff, peer relations, textbook quality, and coursework relevancy toward academic achievement. Initially, 26 students were asked to write down a statement describing their viewpoint on each of these four areas. Their statements were then used as the basis for polling the entire group to determine if there was strong agreement, slight agreement, slight disagreement, or strong disagreement (Appendix A). Obtaining the cooperation of the foreign students was complicated by the fact that there was a great deal of concern that the open expression of their opinions would have negative repurcussions. Of the 26 who participated, not all students responded to all questions. Whether this was because of a concern about possible consequences, or just a typical percentage of questions that the participant did not have an opinion on is not clear.

The overall response to statements regarding the faculty and staff/student relationships was positive; however, the fact that students only slightly agreed with statements which are very positive is an indication that they feel that there could be improvement. Also, from what could be determined, apparently this refers more to the social interaction rather than the professional relationships, as instructors were credited by most as being readily available for assistance. The use of the terms faculty and staff as well as instructor may have caused some confusion if an instructor was perceived as being different

from faculty and staff. The statement receiving the most even distribution of results was statement 6, "Some of the lecturers are friendly, and some speak in degradation of Africa." The statement is somewhat ambivalent itself, and some may have responded to the first part which was positive, while others may have been responding to the second portion which was negative. Time constraints precluded our being able to revise the original statements to avoid such contradictory statements, so some of our results are inconclusive.

Analysis of the results of statements about peer relations indicates that while an overt effort usually must be initiated by the foreign student, most American students are receptive and friendly. That most students agree that the degree of interaction varied with the individual may be an indication both that the personalities of the two individuals is a factor, and also, that despite the fact that some "ice must be broken" to begin a relationship, there have been some good solid friendships formed between foreign and American students. A little more than half (Appendix A) of the respondents had favorable reactions to positive statements, indicating that among the foreign students there is a belief that better relations could exist, and a more open attitude among American students could be a good, educational experience for both parties. Perhaps the most revealing statement is that American students are conceived of as being uneducated about other countries by the majority of those polled, and moreover, respondents strongly agreed on this point. This is consistent with the view commonly expressed by people of other countries about Americans as a whole that we tend to be uninformed about international matters. That students in a higher education program are still viewed as being uneducated about other countries is a signal that our social studies programs may not be effective enough.

The prevailing opinion among foreign students polled seems to be that the

quality of textbooks is good. It also seemed to be the general consensus that while they are good, they are not outstanding, and many students seemed to feel that they were expensive. We interpreted statement number 28 as meaning that despite the difficulties one would expect that someone whose first language is not English would have, they were able to understand the textbooks. The great majority of students agreed on this point, so it could be concluded that the textbooks were regarded as having clarity of language. The other controversial statement made is that, "Textbook represents one source of information." Most students agreed with this statement, intimating that they recognized that there were other learning experiences and resources which were available. It is not clear, however, if they feel that more sources should be utilized, or if this was simply an observation on their part.

In the fourth area, coursework relevancy, respondents indicate a general satisfaction with their courses, and with the idea that the knowledge acquired will be useful in their work in their country. Most also felt that courses not in their major field of study would be useful. Interestingly, it seemed to be felt that the reason for strong academic rules is to assure that foreign students returning home are successful; i.e., that New Mexico State University has a favorable image or reputation among their countrymen. Statement number 34, "Not very relevant, but some seminar programs have been helpful," is the most evenly divided in how respondents felt, and again, is ambiguous. It is not understood if they feel the coursework is not relevant, or if the seminar programs have been helpful. The foreign students concurred that more emphasis should be placed on students from tropical areas of the world, perhaps indicating that because we are in a hot (though dry) area of the world, our institution may be well suited to educating students from tropical climates. It could also possibly mean that they feel there has been some

type of discrimination against students from these countries. All but three of the students agreed to some extent that they would like to have more access to scientific tours from which they are now excluded because of security reasons. There are two significant points made in this statement, the first being obviously that they would like to have more opportunities to participate in such tours, and the other being the use of the phrase, "so-called 'security' reasons," which seems to imply that they do not fully believe that they are being denied access to such tours strictly because of security needs.

There are several recommendations which could be made on the basis of this study. Planned social activities to introduce faculty and staff to foreign students and provide a feeling of accessibility could be introduced. Whether this is desirable or not is questionable; it is uncertain whether the desire for greater social contact is based on experiences in their own countries, or whether it is felt that American students have social contact with the faculty which they do not. Clearly, such a program would require the full support of the faculty and staff, or it could be worse than no program at all. Some type of follow-up study to further determine if our social studies programs at the elementary and secondary levels need to be strengthened to improve knowledge about other countries seems to be in order. As the world grows smaller through technology, it is more important than ever before that people from different countries understand each other and have some concept of international affairs. Another possibility for improving educational opportunities for foreign students is that scientific tours need not be confined solely to sites having strict security. Realistically, it might be impossible to substitute for all tours, but in many cases other arrangements could be made with planning.

We feel that our transactional evaluation was very helpful in providing

new insight about how foreign students view our university, and we would like to share this information. While the foreign students had to be persuaded to trust us before they would participate, they universally expressed a strong interest in knowing the results. Our hope is that we can have at least a portion of the results published in the Round Up. While as we noted earlier, some of the results did not provide conclusive answers, there was sufficient information to reach some definite conclusions which might benefit others as well as ourselves. Ideally, we can re-structure the statements to try to obtain a more accurate picture of the students feelings, and while the data obtained cannot be regarded as definitive, it cannot help but provoke some questions and thought.

APPENDIX A

TRANSACTIONAL EVALUATION FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS

Instructions: Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate letter on the sheet as follows:

a = strongly agree
b = slightly agree
c = slightly disagree
d - strongly disagree

Faculty and Staff

1. Most faculty and staff have high respect and interest toward foreign students. 18-8 — a b c d

2. I have, most of the time, communicated (interacted) openly with my professors, and they have, most of the time, done the same. 19-7 — a b c d

3. As a whole, there is passive mood among the professors. 14-10 — a b c d

4. Social interaction between professors and students does not occur. 10-14 — a b c d

5. Social interaction between professors and students is fairly good. 18-8 — a b c d

6. Some of the lecturers are friendly, and some speak in degradation of Africa. 13-11 — a b c d

7. Faculty and staff are generally very helpful. 22-3 — a b c d

8. One is normally encouraged to interact. So the degree of interaction depends on the individual student. 20-6 — a b c d

9. Instructors help me with projects and are available to help. 23-3 — a b c d

10. Some interaction but it could be improved. 22-3 — a b c d

Peer Relations

11. My interactions with peers in class is challenging, interesting, and friendly. 21-5 — a b c d

12. Peer relations are most of the time very, very dull. 9-17 — a b c d

13. My peers do not feel it is necessary to discuss anything. a b c d

14. No serious discussion takes place, there is a lack of interest. a b c d

15. Peer relations are scarcely social. a b c d

16. Degree of intereaction depends on the individual student. a b c d

17. American students generally do not know much about other countries. a b c d

18. When foreign students wish to cut the barrier, American students are willing to listen. a b c d

19. Peer relations are good. a b c d

20. Some are very friendly. a b c d

21. Warm and welcoming. a b c d

Textbook Quality

22. Is generally good. a b c d

23. Average and expensive. a b c d

24. Is not worth the money. a b c d

25. Good, though expensive. a b c d

26. Fairly good. a b c d

27. Excellent in most cases. a b c d

28. I can understand the writing in the textbook. a b c d

29. The textbooks are relevant to subject matter. a b c d

30. Adequate. a b c d

31. In general, I have found my textbooks acceptable. a b c d

32. Textbook represents one source of information. a b c d

Coursework Relevancy Toward Academic Achievement

33. All of the courses chosen outside my major area have been relevant. a b c d

34. Not very relevant, but some seminar programs have been helpful. 13-4 — a 3 b 10 c 9 d 2

35. Has practical significance. 20-6 — a 8 b 12 c 5 d 1

36. It will help me in my home country. 22-4 — a 13 b 9 c 3 d 1

37. Relevant in the long run. 23-2 — a 11 b 12 c 1 d 1

38. Appropriate and practical. 20-5 — a 8 b 12 c 5 d 0

39. They make foreign students learn as much as they can, because they don't want them to go back home and be unable to do a good job, so they are very strong with the academic principles. 19-6 — a 9 b 10 c 5 d 1

40. New experiences which, when put together with my former experiences, will help me in my field when I go back home. 23-2 — a 11 b 12 c 2 d 0

41. Academic relevance, but concentration needs to be given to foreign students from tropical areas of the world. 22-3 — a 13 b 4 c 2 d 1

42. Very relevant to our needs and aspirations, but we need to be more involved in any scientific tours which we are excluded from because of the so-called "security" reasons. 21-3 — a 12 b 9 c 2 d 1

43. Foreign students are doing great in this area. 22-3 — a 6 b 16 c 3 d 0